



The Basis Of Morality

In 1837, the Danish Royal Society of Sciences offered a prize to any essayist who could satisfactorily answer the question, “Is the fountain and basis of Morals to be sought for in an idea of morality which lies directly in the consciousness (or conscience), and in the analysis of the other leading ethical conceptions which arise from it? Or is it to be found in some other source of knowledge?” The Basis of Morality is the essay submitted in 1840 by German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. In it, he first mercilessly deconstructs the prevailing Western theory of morality as championed by Immanuel Kant, among others, before establishing a series of maxims and thought experiments which lead him to a conclusion which points squarely at compassion as the cardinal virtue upon which all morality rests. In the appendix to this essay, he links his own conclusion with the conclusions reached millennia earlier by the authors of the Vedas and Upanishads. The essay was ultimately rejected for the prize despite being the only entry, a minor scandal with some speculation that the result was due in no small part to Schopenhauer’s onslaught against Hegel—the judge of the contest being the author of a Hegelian theory of morals.

— Summary by Jeffrey Allen Stumpf.

Translated by Arthur Bullock. Read by Jeffrey Allen Stumpf.

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Genre(s): Modern

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Arthur Schopenhauer

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